

Linda Lingle

call me governor

by Leda C. Goldsmith

First in the eyes of her constituents, Hawaii's new governor, Linda Lingle, is the first woman to rule Hawaii since Queen Liliukolani's monarchy was overthrown in 1893. She is not only Hawaii's first female governor, she is the first Republican governor in 40 years. Before that she was the first female and first Jewish Mayor of Maui—a leader in every sense of the word.

Lingle's positive attitude is infectious, according to people who have worked with her for years. They say she has an uncanny ability to lead, and an "amazing talent to get people interested and excited about what can be possible." Lenny Klompus, her Senior Advisor for Communications, says, "She has a 'can do' attitude." Lloyd M. Yonenaka, a former Maui County information officer said in *Hawaii Business*, "She's interested in new things and wants to know about everything. That makes her mind very broad."

This 50 year old Missouri-born "haole" (Caucasian) woman, whose family were all Democrats, first registered as a Republican because the "Democrats were in power and I couldn't see myself as one of them. She had to rely on the fact that most Hawaii residents, though ideologically Democrats, realized their government was "broken." She offered hope for change, and won, on that issue, by more than 17,000 votes. Charging that the "Democrats let Hawaii stagnate while the rest of the country enjoyed an economic boom in the '90s," she stated, "Democratic voters know the State hasn't been functioning well."

The charming and extremely well spoken Governor, spent her teen and college years in Southern California before heading to Hawaii after graduation. She arrived in Honolulu where her uncle owned the Cutter Ford dealership. There she met Art Rutledge, who hired her as associate editor of the Hawaii Teamster and Hotel Workers newspaper. "He liked my Yiddishe kop." And now, decades later, Governor Linda Lingle and her top aides are teaching Yiddish to their staff.



Photos courtesy of Linda Lingle

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Moving to the much smaller island of Molokai in 1976—because she was “charmed by its people”—she continued her journalism career as owner/editor of the *Molokai Free Press*, a community paper. By 1980, anxious to change Hawaii’s political scene, she ran for Molokai’s seat on Maui’s County Council. She was re-elected in 1982 and 1984. In 1990, at age 37, she became the youngest Mayor in county history. She garnered a second term in 1994.

In 1998, prohibited by term-limits from seeking a third term, she ran against Democratic Governor Ben Cayetano, hoping to get the state out of the disarray the Democrats had caused. Several of them were being investigated, had been indicted, and in a couple of cases sent to prison for public corruption. She lost by 5000 votes.

“That was a wake-up call,” Lingle says. “I knew I couldn’t become governor without putting the Republican party in a better light. The party never had a platform that was in sync with my supporters or the majority of Hawaii residents. We had to adopt one that reflected the majority of people. I also knew, in order to prove myself, I had to take charge and make it happen. I ran for Party Chairman in 1999, and won.” By 2000, Republicans had already gained seats in the State Legislature. “I could be heard. I had demonstrated the ability to take an organization that was not well thought of and turn it around.”

The Governor says, “my second gubernatorial race was easier all around. I understood the rhythms better, and the fund raising. I knew what to expect.”

One factor was dealing with the media. “I learned how to use the press to best advantage.” In fact, she learned so well, that while she was in Washington D.C. attending the National Governor’s

Conference, a reporter for the Washington Times proclaimed “Isn’t she wonderful? She even speaks in complete sentences.” And, indeed she does. Gov. Lingle comes to an interview, as she does to all public appearances, fully prepared. She is so well versed in her issues and agenda that she doesn’t need to refer to aides or to notes.

Another major element in her campaign strategy was changing fundraising tactics: she banked on her Judaism to help her raise money. She attracted national attention with Jewish, Republican and women’s groups throughout the U.S. They lent their support to help her “make life better for all the people in Hawaii.” Honolulu’s Chabad Rabbi, Itchel Krasnjansky, was instrumental in helping her in the Jewish community nationwide.

No one knows how many Jews really live in Hawaii. Estimates run from 7000-12,000 out of 1.2 million residents. Jewish residents of Hawaii, like the general population, tend to vote Democratic. However, Lingle says her Jewish heritage has “helped my political career in Hawaii because it has given me a better understanding of diversity, which in turn, helps me to connect with citizens of varying religious and ethnic backgrounds.”

Because of the Democratic regime’s recent history of corruption and greed, Hawaii residents seemed willing to take a chance and jump party lines. Incidentally, voters in Hawaii do not have to register by political party.

Morton Breier, who lives on the Big Island (Hawaii), said, “As a Jew living in Hawaii I’m torn between a revulsion against the Republican policies of George Bush and the need for changing the ‘old-boy’ network, a legacy of Hawaii Democrats. Linda Lingle’s candidacy brought that to a head. I believe most Jews

here opted for loosening the Democratic grip, hoping Lingle was, and is, not a Bush Republican. Her being Jewish allowed us to give her the benefit of the doubt.”

When asked about goals for her first term, Gov. Lingle articulated several items, the first of which was to “restore trust in government,” saying, “without that, nothing positive can happen.” She also wants to clean up the election process, to “have votes counted fairly” and to “bring about campaign finance reform.” Cleaning up the contracting process is also a priority. “We need to put everyone on equal footing, so you won’t have to know someone to get something done.”

Some say her hybrid combination of journalist/politician makes her an inquisitive leader. She wants to bring new business ventures to Hawaii, to revive the economy and make it easier to do business in the state. This is especially true of the scientific and technology sectors. “We are losing our young professionals to the mainland,” she says, “because we don’t have career opportunities for them here. Hawaii is very family oriented. People who grew up here want to stay, but they can’t if appropriate jobs are not available.”

One example is Christopher P. (Chris) Lee, who was born in Hawaii, left for Yale University, and stayed on the mainland close to 30 years. He worked in the film industry in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, rising through the ranks to become president of production at Tri-Star and later Columbia Pictures. His film supervision credits include *Jerry Maguire*, *Philadelphia* and *As Good As It Gets*. Lee is now back in Honolulu with a two-fold agenda: founding a film school at the University of Hawaii and heading his own independent film company.

"It's an interesting time to come home," he says, "and Governor Lingle is part of that interest. She is providing an opportunity for change. I am actively recruiting others, like myself, who were born in Hawaii and moved to the mainland in the '70s and '80s. Our parents are older now and need our help. It's a good time for us to insert ourselves back into our families."

During the campaign Lingle was judged the candidate most committed to business, a high priority for her. A *Hawaii Business* story said, "Business people want to be able to look at something and know what they're dealing with. Linda doesn't pull any surprises. What you see is what you get. And that's her strength."

"I want to infuse in everyone the importance of a strong economy," the Governor says, "whether they are in human services or land and natural resources. The only way our families can have a good life is if they have good jobs. All of my cabinet members will be focused on the importance of successful businesses and strong economy."

Improving public education is another of Gov. Lingle's top priorities. Hawaii is the only state whose public education standards and the funds to administer them are set and controlled at the state level. In her State of the State message, Lingle said, "The people of Hawaii want better schools, with real alternatives for children who haven't thrived in our one-size-fits-all statewide system. They want a system that puts children's interest first—above unions and politicians. Hawaii's public school system is broken. It's like no other system in America and it's not working."

Jewelry designer Christine Turnbull lives on Maui with her husband, noted sculptor Steve Turnbull, and their two preschool sons. "Unless something is done to improve the public school system, we'll have no choice but to send our kids to private schools," she said. "We're really excited about what Governor Lingle has done so far. But kids grow fast. Let's hope solutions to the education system do, too."

Lingle says, "It used to be that all decisions were made by a few well-intentioned people in Honolulu. Now we realize decisions should be made by those directly affected. The people of Hawaii want local school boards accountable to



Photos courtesy of Linda Lingle

their own communities."

The Governor is advocating for a statewide ballot referendum to decentralize the school system...changing how money is allocated...giving funding to each District (i.e., each Island) to administer appropriately. She also wants to "take school principals out of the labor unions and make them part of management," which, she says, "they rightfully are."

Restoring discipline in the school system is of major importance to the Governor's Education agenda—giving Charter Schools fair funding and getting troubled children alternative help. "In education, as well as in other areas, Linda Lingle wants something for the people of Hawaii. Linda Lingle has a unique way to make it happen. She's also a great friend. Every morning she stops by the offices of staff members to talk and ask what they may need," adds Senior Aide Klompus.

Governor Lingle traveled to Washington D.C. in February for several reasons, primarily to attend the National

Governor's Conference where she made a big hit as one of 16 new GOP governors. Gov. Bob Taft of Ohio said, "She hit the ground running, and she's not afraid to put forward her ideas. She was probably more active in our meetings than any other new governor, in terms of her statements."

"One of the highlights of the trip," Lingle says, "was dinner at the White House." She was seated at First Lady Laura Bush's table and remarked at how gracious and charming she was—how genuine. She also enjoyed her dinner partner, entertainer Lyle Lovett. "I was thrilled. I love Country music." The next day, the Governors had the opportunity for one-on-one conversations with the President. "I was amazed he spent so much time with me...I kept trying to edge away, to give someone else a chance...but he kept talking to me, asking questions. We had about 15 minutes together."

During her Washington visit she also testified before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in support of a bill to grant native Hawaiians federal recognition as an indigenous people. "It is time to set a new course in Hawaii and extend this policy of self-determination and self-governance to the Hawaiian people."

While in D.C. she met with Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and suggested an office of Homeland Security in Hawaii to take advantage of the state's strategic location and active military presence.

And, naturally, in the context of safety and security, Hawaii's tourist industry was discussed. It is a major contributor to the state's economy. "Japanese tourism has dropped 20% since 9/11," she says. "Japanese tourists have more options as vacation destinations, places closer to their homes, so we have a very tough task ahead of us. I'm not sure Hawaii will ever regain the number of Japanese visitors or their level of spending."

"Hawaii must play to its strengths, the climate and unique atmosphere that just make people feel better in Hawaii," she adds. "We're also interesting as a health care destination—the quality of our med-

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ical treatment attracts people from Asia. We bring east and west together in our approaches to medical care.”

Donn Takahashi, Vice President of Hawaii Prince Hotels, General Manager of the Maui Prince and Chairman of the Maui Visitors' Bureau says, “As Mayor of Maui, Linda Lingle recognized the importance of tourism, which was surpassing agriculture as Maui's primary industry. She gave unprecedented funding to the MVB, but in return demanded a detailed marketing plan and report of accomplishments. She runs government with a business mind. It was her vision that keeps Maui on top today. The lessons she learned as Mayor are the strong qualities that will make her a very successful governor, and help tourism remain a leading source of revenue for the state. I will support her, and her team, in any way I can.”

There are many segments of tourism. Recognizing sports tourism as a good market, Lingle brought the Hula Bowl to Maui from Honolulu. “It brings in players and coaches as well as spectators.”

Agricultural tourism is another opportunity. “The agriculture industry is fascinating. It includes crops most people don't see unless they visit farms in Maui. It's important to stress products of Hawaii. The fact is Hawaii is a very safe place to visit for any reason. When terrorism alerts were being upgraded everywhere else, Hawaii remained at a low level.”

Speaking to national media about Hawaii is a high priority on Lingle's mainland visits. During her winter east coast trip she appeared with Judy Woodruff on CNN's *Inside Politics* on *Fox News Live* and *The O'Reilly Factor*,” and spoke with David Broder of *The Washington Post*. February's issue of *Glamour Magazine* featured her in a piece about women governors. Articles

about her have appeared in Jewish papers across this country and even in Israel.

The Governor loves the theater, so she always enjoys New York. But business came first in February when she met with NY's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, one of her major supporters, and former Mayor Rudy Giuliani. To emphasize that “Hawaii is Open for Business” she held meetings with Standard & Poor's, Fitch Ratings and UBW Paine Weber to discuss Hawaii's Bond ratings. She also toured the New York Stock Exchange, meeting with NYSE President and senior executives.

Going back to her Judaism, and the fact that she traveled to Jewish communities throughout the States raising money for her campaign, Gov. Lingle says, “They have sort of adopted me. There is a pride in having me as a Jewish candidate.”

A Reform Jew, she has attended both the Reform and Conservative congregations in Honolulu and is a member of the Jewish Congregation of Maui. But she has a particular affinity for the Chabad in Honolulu led by Rabbi Itchel and his wife Pearl, who moved from New York about 15 years ago. “We are very fond of her. It's amazing that she has become governor. She is very modest, very humble, not at all arrogant. During the campaign,” he added, “she became more intrigued and inspired by her Judaism. She has a strong interest in being a role model for Jewish women.”

The Governor gratefully acknowledges their contribution. “They have gone out of their way to help me. Rabbi Itchel even brings us challahs that his wife bakes every Friday.”

Lingle is probably the only state executive who is a life member of Hadassah. A few years ago, a member of

the Hawaii chapter gave her an annual membership. Not long afterwards, Lingle sent her own check and upgraded to a lifetime membership.

The Governor recalled that as she was lighting the Honolulu Community Menorah during Chanukah one of the young Chabad boys ran up to her with a cell phone. ‘Someone in Israel wants to talk to you. They love you there.’ So I took the phone and was talking to someone so far away, across so many time zones.”

Lingle tells a poignant story about a gift she received from residents of a Jewish geriatric home in the States...“a hand made scarf and bag with my name embroidered on it. The women had also included other small gifts like potpourri and a note that said, ‘Please be nice to the Jewish people.’ I was very touched. I receive many, many gifts. I can't possibly keep them all, but I will always cherish that one,” she says.

Governor Lingle has a sister in Maui and a sister and nephew in California. Her nephew, an aspiring actor, has no problem e-mailing Aunt Linda, asking her to give him a birthday gift of a pair of expensive shoes.” When in Los Angeles she visits her father, now retired and living in Century City, and her mother who has Alzheimer's and has been in a nursing home for many years.

This year, the Community Seder was held at Washington Place, the Governor's mansion in Honolulu, where the kitchen was kashered by Rabbi Itchel, and his wife taught the Governor's chef how to prepare the traditional Passover dishes.

The people of Hawaii are enthusiastic about Gov. Lingle because she exudes enthusiasm herself. “I get up excited every day and give it everything I've got.” lifestyles